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THE DIDO EPISODE AS A TRAGEDY

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The strongest impression made by the fourth book is due to the character of Dido, and this alone takes us to tragedy. The epic is essentially the man's poem, to record his bravery, his travels, and his misfortunes. There is no room there for female characters, unless they be Amazons or passive women like Penelope or Andromache. Beautiful these women are, but it must be borne in mind that they do nothing, serving chiefly to furnish a background against which the horrors of war seem yet more horrible. But tragedy is the soul's epic, and for the struggles of the spirit, for hatred and revenge, for heroic sacrifice and fearless defiance of wrong, woman is as strong as man, or even stronger. Hence it is tragedy that gives us the great names of women in ancient literature—Antigone and Alcestis, Clytemnestra, Electra, Phaedra, and Medea. An older tragedy like the *Agamemnon* might be called by the name of the king, but this does not conceal for a moment the superior power of the queen to engage and exercise our feelings. Euripides had a clearer vision, and named his tragedy for Medea and not for Jason. It is only among these heroines of tragedy that Dido can find meet company. She is not a child like Ariadne, not a Europa nor a Pasiphaë. She is an ill-starred queen. *Infelix Dido*.

Homer may nod, but the tragedian never; he seizes our attention for once and all, holding it on the strain until the piece is done. The action must move fast, and hope and fear, love and hate, must take their way in rapid course. Dido acts. She usurps our interest. It is her story from the moment that we hear of the crime which shattered her happiness. She founded a city. She defied her enemies and despised her suitors. From the first meeting with Aeneas she determined his action. The banquet followed soon. Once her scruples were overcome—and the struggle was short—she set about the wooing. She led the hero about the city and showed

him her walls that were well begun. She renewed the banquet. She planned the hunt. She took his sword and gave him a Tyrian sword in its place. Last of all she dressed him up in Tyrian fashion and set him to superintending her walls. Her capacity for suffering was equal to her capacity for deciding and for acting. At one flash she divined the movements of Aeneas and burst into violent reproach, which turned to entreaty and again to wild denunciation. She subdued her pride for love and sent pitiful petitions to the ships. She planned calmly her tragic end, and carried it out as she had planned. She had the power to feel and the power to suffer, and her energy was irresistible.

On the tragic stage tread none but princes, and Dido is a queen of the line of Belus and Agenor. Her father was a king, and her brother received the crown of Tyre. By birth they were of that same house to which belonged the great and unhappy women of the family of Minos of Crete. The story ran that Jupiter loved Europa and carried her away. She became the mother of Minos, who married Pasiphaë, and she became the mother of Ariadne and of the famous Phaedra. To the same line by marriage belonged Aeetes, father of Medea and brother of Circe. Of the house of Belus and Agenor were also the unhappy Danaids; and so Dido is inferior in birth to no heroine of tragedy. Virgil has deliberately broken with tradition in order to make her the equal in rank of those whose names alone were considered worthy of a place in the most serious forms of literature.

As the hero of tragedy must be a prince, so the scene is regularly laid in a palace. It is so in the Dido story. After the meeting in the temple Aeneas returned no more to the ships until after the parting scene. In the palace was the banquet, and from there they set out to view the city on the following morning. There the banquet was renewed. Before the doors, as if upon the stage, gathered the brilliant cavalcade on the morning of the hunt. Tragedy loves spectacles, and this is superb. The brilliant company is waiting, and the impatient horse, glorious in purple and gold, champs his foaming bit. At last the doors are opened, and Dido moves forward surrounded with all her retinue:

Tandem progreditur magna stipante caterva,
Sidoniam picto chlamydem circumdata limbo:
cui pharetra ex auro, crines nodantur in aurum,
aurea purpuream subnectit fibula vestem.

This whole passage glitters with color. Gold is mentioned three times in two lines and four times in fourteen. The whole description is pictorial and highly spectacular. As this pageant was enacted before the palace doors, so it was there the stormy parting scene took place; and this might be acted on the stage without alteration. Within the doors the prostrate queen was carried by the servants. From her tower she watched the ships of the departing Trojans, and behind those walls she died like Phaedra.

The treatment of time is scarcely less dramatic than the unity of place. In Homer it will be remembered that sunrise and sunset are events in the narrative. Homer usually allows both his hearers and himself to sleep at night. In tragedy there is no time for night. If events could not have happened in twenty-four hours, the fact is ignored. Time is of no consequence. It is almost eliminated. During a choric song days may pass, as in the *Agamemnon*. It is so in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*. After the day of the hunt there is no more count of time. It is a poetic injustice to attempt a time-analysis. The Fama interlude serves, like the opening chorus of the *Agamemnon*, to divert our attention and to create the impression that much time has elapsed. Night is often mentioned, but not as the sequel of the day. It is for the sake of the sympathy of the hour with the event. It was night when strange voices sounded from the tomb of Sychaeus and the weird owl prolonged her wailing note. It was night when all nature was at rest, but the storm raged in Dido's heart. Morning was the time for sailing and the most awful hour for the death. The treatment of time is in this book a matter of taste, in so far as morning and night are chosen. In so far as the succession of day and night is ignored, it is dramatic.

The truth is that in the fourth book there are several passages that are really lyric in nature, and among these are those descriptive of night. This is a tragic feature. The tragic poet, it is true, is not allowed to express his feelings in his own person, but he has the

chorus to speak for him. From none but a chorus would come so well the words:

Heu vatum ignarae mentes! quid vota furentem,
quid delubra iuvant? (iv. 65, 66)

These are the reflections of experience grown wise in the knowledge of human nature. They are the spectator's or the poet's observation. When we come to the description of the marriage, we have something more than mere epic. This is a lyric touch. The real meaning of the words lies unexpressed.

prima et tellus et pronuba Iuno
dant signum: fulsere ignes et conscius aether
conubiis, summoque ulularunt vertice nymphae. (166 ff.)

Tragedy has closer kinship with the lyric than has the epic, and on these grounds we explain lyric passages in the fourth book. The beautiful lines beginning,

Nox erat, et placidum carpebant fessa soporem (522 ff.)

are a wonderful piece of art too delicate for the epic. In the compass of half a dozen lines are contained almost every word in the language denoting rest and quiet or weariness: *nox, placidum soporem, fessa, quierant, tacet, somno positae sub nocte silenti*. Then follows an antistrophe depicting the storm in Dido's heart:

saevit amor, magnoque irarum fluctuat aestu.

The lyric character of this picture is signally shown by its similarity to a fragment of Alcman (65 in Hiller-Crusius). The closing lines of the fourth book are like a final utterance of the chorus. At least we find in them the reflections of the poet upon Dido's life. She died not in fate's appointed way, nor by a death she merited, but unhappy, and fired with a sudden madness.

It has been said already that the parting scene could be put upon the stage without alteration. It is also to be pointed out that it is in the form of a debate like that which is found in Euripides' *Medea*. There are in the speech of Aeneas distinctly rhetorical elements, and it is on technical grounds that he creeps out of blame. He had never consented to their marriage nor entered into a treaty, and he weakly denies the exercise of personal choice. It is further to be observed that there are present in this scene only two persons and the servants,

just as in the drama of Aeschylus. The same is true of the colloquy between Dido and her sister at the beginning of the fourth book. Moreover, the sister of the heroine, like the nurse who appears near the last, is a stock character of tragedy. One will recall Ismene in Sophocles' *Antigone* and the nurse of Phaedra in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. The messages carried by Anna from the palace to the ships will recall the messenger of the stage, and the boy Ascanius with the ill-omened mantle of Helen may suggest to some the children of Medea sent with the robe to Jason's bride. Suicide was well known in tragedy. So died Ajax, Dejanira, and Phaedra. Dido's death, as custom demanded, was within the palace and not before it.

Mr. Nettleship has pointed out tragic irony in the fourth book. Dido and Anna sacrifice to Phoebus, Ceres, and Lyaeus—the gods that preside over the foundation of cities and the arts of peace; but she was soon to forget her city and to leave unquenchable enmity to her posterity. Perhaps the irony of the banquet scene is even greater. She invokes Jupiter, the god of guests, and by her guest she was to fall. She calls upon Bacchus, the giver of joy, but her happiness was so soon to pass away. She prays for kindly Juno to be near, and Juno proved the unkindest of all to her. Last of all, she prays that the day may be a joyous one to the Tyrians and to them who have come from Troy, while the fourth book ends with a curse and a legacy of hatred. The whole banquet scene seems to be a mocking premonition of the future. It is almost clause by clause the antithesis of the conclusion of the fourth book. All turned out other than she prayed and hoped. It is the *peripeteia* or irony of fate.

Tragedy loves dark and ambiguous sayings. It may be that we are pressing the point a little too hard, but one can hardly fail to feel the double meaning in the words:

Iuppiter, hospitibus nam te dare iura locuntur,
hunc laetum Tyriisque diem Troiaque profectis
esse velis, *nostrosque huius meminisse minores.* (i. 731 ff.)

Surely they would remember that day. There is another line that is perhaps occasionally misunderstood because it is not recognized as deliberately ambiguous.

Extremam hanc oro veniam (miserere sororis),
quam mihi cum dederit, *cumulatam morte remittam.* (iv. 435, 436)

This is clearly intended to convey one meaning to the reader and another to Anna. Tragedy abounds in this gloomy innuendo.

Perhaps, after all, these tragic features that have been observed may all be traced to the plot. This, as Aristotle says, is the soul of tragedy, and Dido's life is essentially tragic. Passionate, impetuous, and powerful, she was capable only of great things, great success or awful disaster. Royal birth and talent raised her up to an eminence from which fate should cast her down. She was not guiltless, yet she did not wholly deserve her fate. It was inevitable from her nature. She had set before herself an ideal of life as pure and loveless as Daphne's, while she was capable of a passion as irresistible as Medea's. After her cold lover's departure she was too intensely proud to live. Death was the only escape from self-torment.

Thus plot and character are so essentially tragic that there was no other way in which to treat the story. Tragic suggestions come unbidden. Tragic gloom and tragic irony need not be sought; they are inevitable. The action of the story is not in space; it works itself out in Dido's heart, and so the scene is constantly in the palace. Her suffering knows no cessation by night nor by day; hence there is no count of time. Yet the smaller features that have been mentioned help the dramatic associations; these are the sister and the nurse, stock characters of the stage; the messages carried from the palace to the ships, the ominous gifts carried by Ascanius, and the spectacular pageant enacted before the palace on the morning of that fatal day which was the cause of all her sorrows.